

"Sorry, We're Closed"

(formerly titled, "Come in, We're Open")

March 29, 2020 homily -- Zoom online service (COVID-19 closure)

Pam El-Dinary, Worship Associate, Channing Memorial Church

In these topsy-turvy times, how do we respond? With life-as-we-knew-it shut down, we take stock of what matters. Amidst the upheaval, we pick up the pieces and create something new.

Introduction

April Fool's Day is coming up on Wednesday. Haven't we been tricked enough, already? My original topic for today was "Come in, We're Open." ["Come in We're Open" sign] Ah, the hysterical irony! In response, I could either GO hysterical -- or I could laugh hysterically. Choosing laughter, I quickly identified my new title: "Sorry, We're Closed!" [Flip sign to "Sorry, We're Closed"] It was a joke that quickly revealed an equal measure of spiritual depth. From a props standpoint, I merely needed to flip my sign over. It also feels like--just like that--the world has been turned on its head.

Trickster Energy -- Everything Topsy-Turvy

I thank my fellow Worship Associate Ostara for her insight about the Trickster energy at play in all this Coronavirus upheaval, creating chaos just to see how we mortals will react. My husband, Ashruf, related observations from social media about a sort of Trickster Trifecta:

- On Sunday, March 8th, the week started by springing forward to Daylight Saving Time.
- By mid-week, there was a full moon.
- And we topped it off with Friday the 13th.

It was during that week that everything suddenly shut down--shaking up everything into chaos--like the pieces in my Boggle game.

Impacts of Sorry, We're Closed -- Interdependent Web

COVID-19 sent everything topsy-turvy, and the far-reaching impacts reveal the deeply interconnected nature of our world. In our 7th Unitarian Universalist principle, we covenant to

affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are all a part--and I lift that up here with a few examples of the impacts of the coronavirus.

“Sorry, We’re Out (of That)”

To start things off, what better way to symbolize the Interdependent Web (pause) than with a (pause) bag of Potato chips! Seriously, I have an example! My hometown in Indiana has a Frito Lay factory, where my friend’s husband works. When murmurings of the Coronavirus began, potato chips started flying off the shelves. People wanted comfort food. Things were looking up for the potato chip industry. Until they weren’t. [FLIP bag upside-down] Especially for spicy chips. You see, to make spicy chips, they need special protective gloves to clean the hot spices off the lines. Well, those same protective gloves started selling out as people grew concerned about catching the virus. Those same protective gloves are used by hospitals who really need them. If the factory can’t get the right gloves, they can’t make spicy chips. And as other such supplies dwindle, it could theoretically halt chip production altogether. Although this is--at one level--a fun and frivolous example, it impacts the livelihoods of many citizens, which in turn impacts the local economy. This small-town example is only a microcosm of the economic ripple effects we’ve been seeing globally.

Second example: As soon as school closings were announced, many of us became quickly attuned to the ripple effects of those closings. We could easily see the impacts not only on children’s education, but in numerous other areas:

- sports and recreation programs that promote physical fitness and socialization,
- the sudden need for childcare and its impacts on parents’ employment,
- meals programs that are the main source of nutrition for vulnerable families.

The interdependent web of schools is far-reaching.

Third example: Right here at Channing, the closing of our worship space at Linden Hall impacted not only my topic this morning, but an entire suite of worship services-- carefully crafted with one flowing into the other--leading up to (Wait for it!) “Bring-a-Friend Sunday.” Oh, the side-splitting irony! And when First Unitarian in Baltimore closed to public gatherings, we also had to postpone Rev. Jane’s installation ceremony. This decision impacted another interconnected web of cancellations, including travel plans of colleagues and friends across the country.

What Now? (and What are the Gifts of “Sorry, We’re Closed?”)

So, what now? Now is the time we begin to see where things land, and how we handle it. What opportunities are there in “Sorry, We’re Closed?” [sign]

Inventory

Sometimes stores close down because they’re taking inventory. Even though ours is a forced closure, it can be an opportunity for us to pause, take inventory, and regroup. Some of us are using the extra time in our homes to take literal inventory. One of the first jobs my housebound college student undertook was cleaning her room, including sorting through her stuff. This was a great way to take stock of what she had--and to identify what was no longer needed.

We can also take inventory as a church--to assess what we do-and-don’t have, and what we do-and-don’t need. Right now we:

Don’t have:

- A physical space to gather.
- Physical contact in hugs and handshakes.
- Printed orders of service.
- A choir or Congregational singing.
- An Apocalyptic supply of hand sanitizer.

Do have:

- A virtual space to gather.
- Emotional contact in emails and video-chats.
- A liturgy and a minister.
- Music from a professional director.
- An Apocalyptic supply of commitment to one another.

Need:

- Community.
- Worship.
- Fellowship.
- Pastoral care.
- Laughter.

These are rising to the top as some of our essential needs as a community. And check your email from Friday for a survey designed to further identify individual needs, as well as what we can offer to meet them.

What about things we don't need? Like sorting through the stuff in our homes, this, too, can be revealed by our inventory of church life. Are there things we thought were absolute essentials, but we're actually doing fine without? Are there even things we've always done, but when we step back we see that they aren't currently serving us well? It may be too soon to tell, but in retrospect we can see what we truly missed and what we might choose to let go. This opportunity to take inventory may well turn out to be a gift in the life of our congregation.

Transformation

Another gift of this topsy-turvy time: Transformation. Organizations everywhere are transforming their operations for social distancing. Just Thursday, I got three new emails about businesses offering curbside pickup.

Our Channing friend Alice shares a great example here locally: The Howard County General Hospital Foundation is raising donations to provide meals to those working the front lines at the hospital--to show our gratitude while helping them stay nourished and focused. This also provides needed business to our local restaurants during this time.

I also heard about a school district that sent buses on their regular routes to deliver meals to students, knowing that pickup spots in schools would fail to reach many families in need. I imagine how comforting the familiar face of the bus driver must be. And counselors and other support staff can even go along to check in and see how students are doing. What an innovative solution!

Pandemic Players is another great example of transformation, founded by our very own music director, Stephen. This theater group, formed literally overnight, is live-streaming productions in the public domain. Participants perform--and view--from the comfort of their safe space. This provides outreach to multiple needs: a creative outlet for artists, an engaging experience for theater-goers, even funding (through donations) to sustain local community theaters. The motto on their Facebook page is a testament to resilience: "Nothing can quiet our passion, community is our home."

Transformation at Channing

("Come in: We're Open" Even When Doors Are Literally Closed)

There has also been transformation at Channing Memorial Church. Being physically closed and needing to regroup [[Sorry, We're Closed sign](#)] has compelled us to transform how we offer

church during this time. [flip -- “Come in, We’re Open”] Zoom rooms have emerged as the virtual space for worship and fellowship. The annual pledge drive is being completed online--and even with the change in procedure, we surpassed our match level for new and increased pledges!

Not only are we looking for creative ways to offer what we’ve already been doing, but we’re also creating totally new ways to connect:

- A haiku contest,
- a community crossword puzzle,
- live cello music in a video-chat.

Literally as I was typing this homily, the first issue of the Channing *fUUnZine* popped into my email. Our commitment to one another has never been clearer. What do you think of that, Trickster!?!

Fulfilling Our Mission in These Times of Upheaval

Although everything is different in how we function these days, we are still Channing Memorial Church--and we still have a mission, to:

Invite seekers into spiritual community
Connect souls in mystery and wonder, and
Ignite compassion into action.

Although the Coronavirus Trickster has shaken things up, we have picked up the pieces to carry on with our mission.

✚ Worshipping together online is a way we connect souls in mystery and wonder. We continue to offer Soul Matters, and we’re trying new formats, like guided visualization, and journaling and conversation.

✚ Many of us have found creative ways to ignite compassion into action, in response to COVID-19. Sewing protective masks, promoting legislation, delivering toilet paper. And as we take inventory with our new survey, we’re identifying further ways to respond as a congregation.

✚ Then, there’s the first part of our mission: to "invite seekers into spiritual community." The community piece remains stronger than ever. Online potlucks, candles of joys and concerns, and choir fellowship nurture our sense of spiritual community. And the brand, spanking new Community Connections Team is at the ready to assess ongoing needs and coordinate care for members and friends.

The question is, the invite piece--going beyond those who are already here: How can we still be inviting and welcoming in these times? Does it make more sense to hunker down with our existing community--to get the comfort we need to get through the day? --OR-- Do we reach out and invite others into the community of online worship and fellowship? Even if it's experimental? Even if it's clunky? Does what we have to offer need to be perfect before we are willing to share it?

Like many businesses, when we announce on our website that we're closed, we can invite people to "visit our online store" with links to Zoom worship. With everything online, we could even invite those far away into spiritual community. In these topsy-turvy times, let us take stock of our life as a church and be open to transformation in how we Invite, Connect, and Ignite.

Conclusion

When the Trickster of COVID-19 shook things up, all the threads of our interdependent web got pulled and frayed. In response, many of us find ourselves hanging on to the threads of our lives: tugging at the strings of our connection; pulling the strings apart as we take stock of our lives; and, ultimately, miraculously, reweaving those threads into a completely new fabric, that has become something beautiful.

May it be so. And Amen.